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Welcome to the Dollhouse.

Constructing Bodies in Crytek's *Crysis* and Mattel's *Kiddle* Dolls.

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Abstract

In this paper, we try to defamiliarize our assumptions about dolls/action figures and avatars, by confronting two seemingly distinct toy lines. We reactivate a lineage between avatars and dolls through an inspection of how bodies are constructed, and how play is experienced with these material props. We use Jean-Marie Schaeffer's notion of hypernormal mimetism as a fundamental aspect of prosthetic body construction in games. In order to maximize the defamiliarization effect, we have decided to adopt the vocabulary associated with dolls as a general framing device. The gender associations that implicitly play a role in these dynamics are also put forward.

Keywords: doll, avatar, first-person shooter, game history, immersion, gender stereotypes

Introduction

On the evening of November the 20th, 2014, Amsterdam residents and tourists were invited to a live puppeteering show in the middle of the city. "Turn on the Lights" is an annual event sponsored by a prestigious local store, and designed to kick off the Christmas shopping season. For this seventh edition, the Catalan theatre company *La fura dels baus* was allowed to take over Dam Square, one of the most iconic public spaces in Amsterdam. At the beginning of the street theatre act, a gigantic mannequin stood up. A crowd of a few thousands was suddenly reduced to a swarm of ants as this figure walked around the square

for thirty minutes. Its movements seemed to echo those of a paradoxical puppeteer: on its belly, an actual human performed similar gestures throughout the show. Eventually, the mannequin proceeded to juggle a giant ball, forcing the tiny acrobats inside to play along. Above the scene, strings were pulled by two enormous mechanical cranes (figure 1).



Figure 1. Giant mannequin in the show *Turn on the Lights* (*La fura dels baus*, 2014)

This reversal of scale was spectacular to say the least. Yet the audience was oddly calm while the giant ball rolled back and forth over the square, as if this monumental ode to play evoked familiar memories, emotions, and even postures. Indeed, while we play, we feel elevated, and many props created for child play explicitly seek to transcend human proportions. Such is the case of the doll and other figurines, all of which are close relatives of the puppet.

In contemporary historical accounts of video games, another kind of giant mannequin is commonly inflated and takes over a great deal of discursive space, namely the great innovator, and the myths that we construct around him. In a recent interview published in the innovation section of *The New York Times*, id Software's lead engineer discussed his role in the advent of first-person shooters. Reflecting on the history of video games prior to his significant contribution, he declared: "It was like playing with dolls" (quoted by Engber, 2014). *The New York Times* journalist who penned the feature concurred; according to the interviewer, this era "ended in November 1991, when Carmack and his colleagues at id

Software put out a program called Catacomb 3-D”. In this report, the parallel between doll play and video game play vanishes as soon as it is posited, relegated to an obscure dark age of video game history. This anecdote is symptomatic of a tendency in business journalism to echo glorifying statements about technological innovation. It can also be related to a common argumentative stance in game studies: in order to better understand an object whose legitimacy has not been clearly established in many academic fields, it appears reasonable to emphasize its uniqueness and trace hard-edged contours around it.

In this paper, we seek to study two figures that obviously have much in common but have been encoded differently in various historical and cultural constructions, most notably where gender is concerned: the doll and the avatar. In doing so, we will continue to explore lineages of “interactive imaginary worlds” (Wolf, 2014:126) that have recently attracted more attention in the field (Brougère, 2008; Westecott, 2009; Berry, 2011), and develop Chris Bateman’s intuition that the “character model [in video games] might best be understood by direct analogy with a doll” (2014:416). In *La fura dels baus*’s street theatre scene described at the beginning of this paper, the sense of agency and enchantment we feel during play is evoked by the scale of the action. However, whether we are discussing the launch of a Christmas shopping season in a major city, or the more mundane situation of make-believe engagement with miniature toys, play is closely bound to economic conditions, material restrictions, and affective dynamics. In what follows, we will expose some of these defining contextual elements through a comparative study of two seemingly opposite objects: Mattel’s *Kiddle* doll series, produced from 1966 to 1971; Crytek’s *Crysis* series of first-person shooters, with three main titles released between 2007 and 2013 on various game systems. The first embodies cuteness, is designed for children, and seems specifically to target little girls. The second was sold with hyper violence and through the ideal of a powerful body extension, and became very popular with young male adults. Both, we will argue, may be understood as constructed affective ecosystems that rely heavily on the surrogate body of the doll/avatar. In order to properly situate our study, we will first expose the relative absence of dolls in contemporary game studies, and how the concept of the doll is articulated with regards to the avatar.

1. Guys and dolls

In her recent contribution about characters in video games, Jessica Aldred states that there are two conceptions of player avatars colliding in game studies : the extension-of-self figure, which is often characterized as being specific or facilitated by the digital age; the character-in-itself figure, which proposes a strong fictional identify to be appropriated and played with (2014:355-56). These two figures have rarely been articulated efficiently in game theories. In Jean-Marie Schaeffer's seminal contribution *Pourquoi la fiction?* (1999), child games, theatre, cinema, all the way to contemporary video games are integrated in a broader analysis of fictional immersion. The eminent CNRS scholar doesn't have the space to explore all the relevant lineages, and makes very few specific references to dolls. While he discusses Tamagotchi as a virtual doll, Lara Croft – his prototypical case of digital fiction – is presented as a character to be experienced “first hand”. In this section, we will present how the concept of the doll is at the heart of this tension in contemporary developments of game studies.

Roger Caillois' classic study of games acknowledges a great variety of play behaviors. In his typology, cultural forms such as stage drama or cinema expand into adulthood the same *mimicry* impulse so prevalent in child play, much like sophisticated dollhouses. While his account is too broad and ambitious to focus at length on doll play, it reveals associations and biases that are deep-rooted in European cultures, and still have an impact on the way we evaluate and reflect on these material props. For instance, he highlights some of the gender biases that were prevalent at the time: the “wide array of games for girls are designed to mimic common, realistic, domestic behaviors, while those for boys evoke distant, fantastic, inaccessible or downright unreal activities” (1958:42; freely translated). Interestingly, even the common names attached to the material props that are so essential to this imaginative play have been encoded with clear gender implications: girls play with dolls, while boys use action figures.

In *Rules of Play*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's monumental account of games as formal and social constructions, we can see how age and gender associations still partake in the

construction of game studies. Much like Caillois and Huizinga, the authors stress the essential role of mimetic play at a young age. However, such behavior – exemplified through the act of playing with a doll – is said to be less tangible, and cannot be related as easily to the psychological concept of the magic circle:

The boundary between the act of playing with the doll and not playing with the doll is fuzzy and permeable. Within this scenario, we can identify concrete play behaviors, such as making the doll move like a puppet. But there are just as many ambiguous behaviors, which might or not be play, such as idly kneading its head while watching TV (2004:94).

Under the impulsion of a few scholars – “ludologists” by trade or by association –, the study of games at the beginning of the 21st century focussed on highly regulated forms of imaginative play: rules-based systems designed to pit players against themselves or others, in order to determine a clear end state, winners and losers. These aspects are essential in Juul’s synthetic overview of game definitions, which were aggregated and posited as a “classic game model” in human cultures (2005, chapter 2). While many ludologists came to acknowledge the omnipresence of mimetic/narrative elements in contemporary games, notions such as player agency and competition take center stage, while the manipulation of an anthropomorphic figure in a miniature world recedes.

In the course of his study of the classic textual adventure game *Deadline* (Infocom, 1982), Espen Aarseth is fascinated by the modification of the traditional role of the reader by the mystifying textual interface. While the author is clearly aware of connections between electronic games and previous forms of play, and even other forms of engagement with fictional characters, one of his distinctions will become an essential construction in the nascent field of game studies: “The user assumes the role of the main character and, therefore, will not come to see this person as an other, or as a persona at all, but rather as a remote-controlled *extension of herself*” (1997:113; emphasis added). This assertion appears contradictory, when one considers Aarseth’s lengthy demonstration of inconsistencies in this form of mediated interaction, especially the inability of the text parser to understand many of the sentences produced by the players. But the ideal of avatarial ‘extension of the self’ is

clearly formulated. Thanks to direct input, the otherness of this entity is said to fade away as the avatar becomes the player's extension.

In his Ph.D. thesis *What is the Avatar?* (2006), Rune Klevjer explores the symbiotic relationship further, going so far as to evoke an umbilical bond between player and avatar. This bond develops historically, the author argues, as we see innovations such as the "3D avatar" (the creation of dynamic perspective thanks to polygonal calculations) and motion controls. Hypotheses about the evolution of video games made by scholars seem to echo John Carmack's conception of progressive "shifts" towards more immediacy, with first-person perspective posited as a central element. Take, for instance, Mark Lahti's conception of history in "As we become machines": "Thus, video game history is characterized by a significant shift [...] to a fully subjective perspective where character and player are unified into a first-person movement through the virtual" (2003:161). This statement perfectly echoes Alison McMahan in another classic paper from the same anthology (2003:63).

The avatar-as-extension construction can also be related to many trends in video game design, such as the silent protagonist, the blank slate avatar, and evermore customizable virtual body shells (see Therrien, 2013). Along with the common marketing rhetoric inherited from interactive fiction ("YOU decide the fate of the universe!"), it seems that designers/the industry also sense a benefit in addressing the audience through the ideal of an extension of the self. Yet as is made readily apparent in the omnipresence of third-person perspective games, and even in customization-heavy first-person shooters and role-playing games, the physical appearance of the avatar remains an object of strong fascination for gamers. In the next section, we will test certain assumptions about avatariation through an analysis of how the body is represented / constructed in *Crysis*, an example that perfectly fits the extension ideal. We will highlight how the design of such an entity echoes the creation of dolls. Our inspection of *Kiddles* will nuance some of these connections while highlighting the relevance of exploring such a lineage in spite of the cultural / academic bias against it.

2. Dolling up the avatar

2.1 The *Crysis* series

When *Crysis* was released in 2007, it was presented as the pinnacle of first-person shooters, both technologically and in terms of the game experience. Very few computers available to the general public at the time were able to render the world created in the CryEngine to its full potential. The plot will undoubtedly appear trivial even to Hollywood blockbuster aficionados: following an initial confrontation with the tyrannical North Korean regime on a contested south pacific island, a more extraordinary foe steps forward. Very little is known about the alien invaders, save for the ease of movement and deadly potential of their squid-like body. More interestingly for our argument, the player character is a silent avatar codenamed Nomad, a name that already connotes freedom. He is part of a special assault team that wields the latest technological wonder engineered by the US Army: a full body suit that is directly connected to the soldier's neural system. The cyborg body can trigger powerful extended abilities at the press of a button: "maximum force" is useful to defy gravity or move vehicles out of the way, "maximum armor" prevents bullet from reaching the fragile human body, and "maximum stealth" makes this body perfectly invisible. Undoubtedly, agent management games such as *The Sims* would be a more obvious choice to discuss dolls in video games, and it typically is the prototypical example to do so. As we shall see, the first-person, "first hand", customizable player extension of *Crysis* is an interesting borderline object to pursue our investigation.

As Steven Poole observed already in 2000, video games are based on a very powerful principle: augmentation of the player's input. This mediated augmentation of physical agency is thematized in *Crysis*' script through the concept of the power suit. Moreover, the original trailers and opening cinematic insist on the customizable experience brought by the affordances of this suit; will you choose to tackle a difficult situation with maximum force, or would you rather navigate the island with maximum stealth? In contrast with many popular FPS franchises, large parts of the *Crysis* world are open to players in any given narrative sub-level. Moreover, in later instances of the franchise, skill and power development trees have been added to the mix; players earn and spend "biotic" energy stolen from the aliens in order

to customize their power fantasy even further. The game design / fictional world builds on the ideal of the “empty shell”, while the more extraordinary elements of the spectacle are justified thanks to a plot of progressive symbiosis between a human body and its technological augmentation – and even through the figure of the alien in later episodes.

In order to trigger complicated and often spectacular represented actions, players have to perform “primitive” actions on the actual interfaces (Grodal and Gregerson, 2009). Most of the time, the relationship between the actual manipulations and the actions depicted on the screen are arbitrary in nature. In the case of *Crysis*, the avatars point of view is controlled through the computer mouse, while more than a dozen buttons are used for the navigation of space, environmental manipulations and enemy neutralisation. Handling all these interface mappings require a lot of psychomotor investment; actual player effort echoes the performance of the avatar, effectively ‘synching’ the two bodies. Still, great disparity emerges in the amounts of energy provided on both ends. As Rune Klevjer noted in 2006, the release and popularity of the Nintendo Wii platform seemed to point towards a future where natural interfaces were commonplace, paving the way for the widespread adoption of mimetic/isomorphic gestures in game play design. Yet as the author observed, metonymic gestures – where only part of the represented movement needs to be performed – are an essential component of avatars play even in the rise of “full motion” games (2006:126;163). We would like to go further and analyse how most of the mappings in a complicated FPS such as *Crysis* rely on miniature gestures, effectively linking the experience of video games to doll play.

According to Jean-Marie Schaeffer, many of the props we use in games of make-believe evoke elements from our encompassing experience in an exaggerated way. This principle of “hypernormal mimetism” is central to his theory of fictional immersion. In the case of video games, augmentation of input exaggerates various aspects of the agency we experience in our lives. When it comes to *Crysis*, our motor engagement with the physical world is modelled with this principle in mind; much like action games in general, an expansion of typical muscular strength and agility is integrated in the algorithmic model of the action on many levels. Even before the power suit is activated, Nomad runs faster, hits harder, jumps higher, and grabs items more quickly. With “maximum force”, the virtual interactions with the

environment become incredibly spectacular, almost to comical effect. As we pointed out earlier thanks to Caillois, exaggeration of physical agency has typically been sold to young males; more recent historical research confirm this common trope of video game marketing (Kline *et al.*, 2003; Kocurek, 2012; Therrien, 2015), and *Crysis* fits the gender stereotypes perfectly. The visual representation of the power suit evokes a masculine – albeit unhuman – musculature (figure 2), and the scenario includes the typical damsel in distress figure early on. More interestingly, the construction of the virtual body occurs through audiovisual references to prototypical Hollywood action movies. In ‘maximum armor’ mode, the avatar’s movements in space are underscored with a sound effect reminiscent of *Robocop* (Verhoeven, 1987), while engaging the cloak mode triggers audio and visual cues taken right out of the *Predator* movie (McTiernan, 1987).



Figure 2. *Crysis* doll (Gamestars, 2011)

The design of this “tangible 3D avatar” (Klevjer) feels like a vehicle, and for good reason: the interface is built to augment the input provided by the user, much like vehicle design. Miniature gestures lend themselves to power fantasies so naturally. However, in the context of this expansive and lush virtual world, this vehicle fails to embody the freedom put forth by the marketing of the game. In contrast with the exploration of space in the open world, the hypernormal agency afforded to the player is very much unidirectional: the game is

modelling an ecosystem based on fear, where “fight or flight” are the only functional scenarios. The aforementioned movie references contribute to the construction of this restricted possibility space in the mind of the player. The interface mappings mimic – in a hypernormal manner – the action tendencies associated with fear and aggression. In the end, the open island acts as another component in this hypernormal modelling operation: wherever players go, lush environments are meant to provide cover to attack or flee, hunt or be hunted. Some startle moments are programmed through cut-scenes, but also occur naturally through the enactment of the hunt in this jungle. All these elements partake in an economy of fear, and the open island ends up paradoxically feeling like another spooky house. Or even, to some extent, a dollhouse populated with “hypermale” electronic puppets.

2.2 The *Liddle Kiddles* series

The *Kiddle* dolls were produced in various series from 1966-1970. If we take Mattel’s director and *Kiddle* creator Elliott Handler at his word, the idea was to craft “small dolls that looked like neighborhood children engaged in typical play situations”, so that part of their emotive appeal was their seeming normalcy (Jensen, 1996: 48). They measured between 2.5 and 4.5 inches; their enormous heads and eyes contrast with their tiny overall size. Given that the stated purpose of *Kiddle* design was to mimic the look of regular kids, this remarkable disproportionality is no small consideration. Clearly, the design of these props relies on the principle of hypernormal mimetism that we have presented above. In this section, we will explain the affective affordances of this design, its similarities and differences with avatarial play, and the gender dynamics that have been inscribed within the prop.

The miniature aspect and exaggerated facial features of *Kiddles* are distinctive traits that came to be associated with cuteness in our culture. The word “cute” itself derives from “acute”, but in becoming aestheticized and popularized it lost the connotation of “sharp” or “shrewd”, and came to refer to prettiness usually associated with smallness. In the 1940s, ethnologist Konrad Lorenz suggested that certain physical attributes in “cute” infants or animals evoke emotional responses from others, and he compiled a list of eight physical attributes that signify cuteness, namely: inappropriate head size in comparison to the body; large protruding forehead in comparison to the rest of the face; small limbs; rounded body

shape; soft body surfaces; round, chubby cheeks; clumsiness (1943). Annie MacNamera has argued that “the increasing use of cuteness as a marketing feature in children’s toys has largely gone unnoticed due to its universal appeal, across gender, age and nation” (MacNamera, 1). Because it is universal and invisible, she explains, cuteness is a sort of silent but deadly aesthetic style that arose during the nineteenth century in the United States. It is likely that *Kiddles* were also influenced by comics, manga and animation aesthetics that became prevalent in early 20th century popular culture. As Marc Steinberg has shown in *Anime’s Media Mix* (2012), Osamu Tezuka’s manga *Astroboy* (1952) played an essential role in the worldwide visibility of the “Super Deformed” style. North America had already been seduced many years before by the oversized eyes of popular animated character such as Mickey Mouse (Iwerks, Disney, 1930) and Betty Boop (Fleischer, 1930).

A great amount of research has been dedicated to the apprehension of emotional faces, including on the development of such abilities. From 1956 onwards, Russian psychologist Alfred Yarbus conducted experiments on eye movement and fixation during common tasks, including for the perception of faces. As the photokymographs taken more than 50 years ago makes perfectly clear, a lot of perceptual attention is dedicated to the eyes of subjects (1967, chapter 7; 179-80). While the recognition of emotional faces is not likely to be completely innate, some neural pathways seem to favor the decryption of such information, and the contagion of such faces has been linked to the human mirror system. Torben Grodal believes the automatic processing of such perception can explain the emotional contagion of close-ups and reaction shots in movies: “Via mirror neurons, the facial expressions’ emotions resonate in the onlooker” (Grodal, 2009:187). The magnification of emotional faces has become a distinctive trait of visual culture, and learning how to decode such information is acquired largely through our experience of dolls as infants. Hypernormal faces are the main distinction point between dolls and the “empty shell” first person avatar, yet they occupy a function similar to the interface mappings that we discussed in the previous section: they facilitate engagement and immersion in specific affective ecosystems.

Compared to the affective ecosystem of *Crysis* that we briefly analyzed above, with its lengthy missions and narrative potential, engagement with a *Kiddle* doll will inevitably appear limited, and unable to keep the infant’s attention for long. A closer inspection of the

phenomenon highlights the necessity to nuance such assumptions. Each doll came with accessories that gave them a different personality, from Telly Viddle equipped with that most beloved of childhood companions, the television set, to Lemon Stiddle with her own lemonade stand. As the first series began to lose its charm, Mattel quickly responded with themed *Kiddles* created around storybook and nursery rhyme-characters such as Liddle Biddle Peep, Cinderiddle, and Liddle Red Riding Hiddle. Although there are earlier examples of serialized marketing, the *Liddle Kiddles* series, with over 100 different incarnations before the franchise ended in 1971, is a particularly evocative example (Strom and Van Dyke, 1986:5). Along with the dolls, there were *Kiddle* vinyl cases, paper goods, lunch boxes, games, records, posters, puppet theaters, dollhouses, snap-happy furniture, and perhaps most remarkably, a line of play clothes for these dolls. The company even diversified the operation with Hiddlemini-Kologne-Kiddles, dressed and scented as flowers in perfume bottles.

Following Salen & Zimmerman's observation (see section one), we could highlight how playing with the dolls and all these disjointed accessories can lead to an inconsistent form of engagement, unbound by the clarity of highly regulated systems, and permeable to the encompassing reality. But another accessory appears to question this conception of doll play: each doll came with an illustrated "Adventures of the Kiddles", "an 18-page fold-out funny comic strip [...] advertising other dolls for sale" along with instructive scripts for play scenarios leading to future purchases (Strom and Van Dyke, 1986:8). In 1970, three Playhouse Kiddles were released; Cookin' Hiddle, Pretty Parlor and Goodnight Kiddle all came with relevant furniture accessories in small rooms that could be assembled. Whitman and Mattel even published press-out books that added even more accessories and narrative elements (figure 3). The practice of grouping the features we just described, including the olfactory engineering and scripts for appropriate play, was dubbed "The Strawberry Shortcake Strategy" by Thomas Engelhardt more than a decade after the Kiddles (1986).

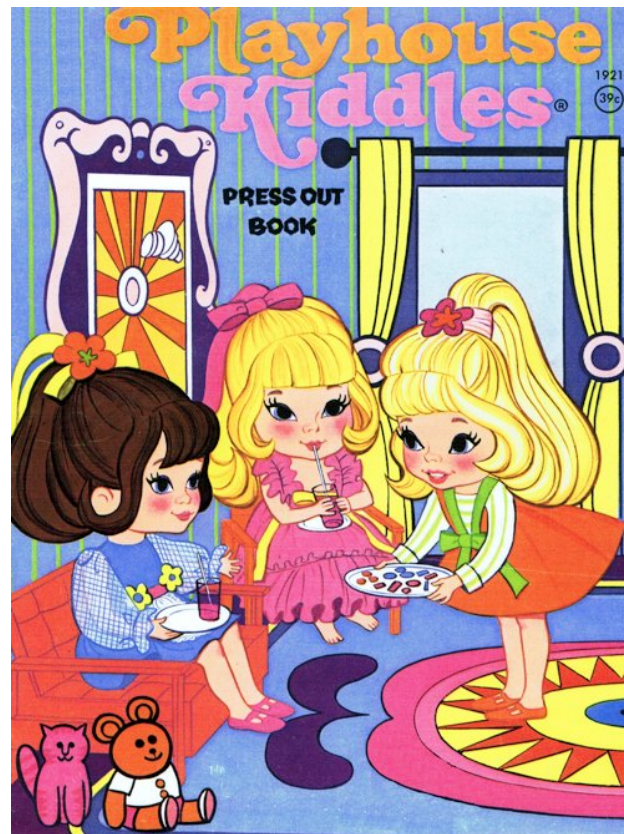


Figure 3. *Playhouse Kiddles* press out book (Whitman, 1971)

In contrast to *Crysis*, the emotional faces, miniature gestures and narrative scripts associated with *Kiddles* were not part of an affective ecosystem based on fear and power fantasies. They were designed as a nurturing ecosystem, again with clear gender implications. Although Mattel actually nodded in the direction of ethnic diversity by introducing *Kiddle* of colour (“Rolly Twiddle”) and gender with a boy doll (“Biff”), *Kiddles* were the product of Elliott Handler’s decision “to follow up Barbie’s huge success with a new line of mini-dolls that, unlike the glamorous teen, would play to the maternal instincts of little girls” (Jensen, 1996:48). Or, as Suzanne de Castell and Mary Bryson would have it, Mattel asked “what untapped desires do girls harbor that could be drawn upon, whether to educate or train them—[...] to capture a market share”, which process resulted in “feminized playthings that escort girls to their proper place in the gender order” (de Castell & Bryson, 1998:238;232). Importantly, cute playthings trigger emotions, particularly for small and prospective consumers who appreciate the scale, while cuteness elicits caring responses. Given these

cathection-inducing qualities of cuteness, the toy industry is able to steer the formation of subjectivity and identity around cultural gender norms in children.

Conclusion

Kim Tofoletti has remarked that the uncanniness of Barbie is most apparent when she is seen out of the habitual play context, stripped of her normalizing clothing and accoutrements, and denaturalized as, for example, in a pile at a flea market. The creepiness of her “taught rubbery limbs, [...] compact torso, [...], and plastic rock-hard shell”, she writes, form a “distinctive configuration” suddenly decontextualized and revealed here (2007:58). These observations resonate with what Daniel Miller has written about toys, namely that they do their job most efficiently, precisely when we “fail to notice them”, as when we come to them in a naturalized context (2008: 54).

In this paper, we have tried to defamiliarize our assumptions by confronting two seemingly distinct toy lines, and reactivate a lineage between avatars and dolls through an inspection of how bodies are constructed, and how play is experienced with these material props. In order to maximize the defamiliarization effect, we have decided to adopt the vocabulary associated with dolls as a general framing device, in spite – or rather because – of the cultural bias against these props in video game studies. We have presented Schaeffer’s notion of hypernormal mimetism as a fundamental aspect of prosthetic body construction in games. *Crysis* is built around the ideal of an empowering empty shell that still relies heavily on miniature gestures and constrained action to elicit heightened affective reactions, centered on fear and domination. The *Kiddle* line is based on emotional faces and scenarios that are meant to incite nurturing behavior. As we have demonstrated, these ecosystems have been sold with clear gender associations. Of course, the specific affordances of both these dollhouses should still be studied, and we have presented some fundamental differences in this paper. In the case of video games, the performance is clearly bound by algorithmic procedures, while doll play remains relatively less restricted. Nonetheless, in the small gesture of dolling up the avatar, we seek to play along with the growing number of contemporary game scholars who seek to open up the discipline to the long, rich, and anthropologically significant history of interactive imaginary worlds.

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Résumé

Dans cet article, nous tentons de défamiliariser nos *a priori* à propos des poupées et les avatars, en confrontant deux lignées de jouets apparemment distinctes. Nous réactivons une généalogie entre la figure de l'avatar et celle de la poupée à travers une enquête sur la façon dont les corps sont reconfigurés et le jeu expérimenté avec ces accessoires ludiques. Nous utilisons la notion de mimétisme hypernormal emprunté à Jean-Marie Schaeffer en tant que principe fondamental pour comprendre la construction d'un corps-prothèse dans les jeux. Afin de maximiser l'effet de défamiliarisation, nous avons décidé d'adopter le vocabulaire associé à la poupée afin d'encapsuler l'ensemble du propos. Les associations de genre qui jouent un rôle implicitement dans ces dynamiques sont également mises en lumière.

Mot-clés : poupée, avatar, jeu de tir à la 1^{ère} personne, histoire du jeu, immersion, stéréotypes de genre